

Friend jailed for life after choking cancer sufferer in 'mercy killing'

David Brown

The family of a devout Christian who was opposed to euthanasia have condemned his churchgoing friend for smothering him in a "mercy killing".

Heather Davidson admitted murder after she put a pillow over the face of David Paterson, who had terminal cancer, as he lay in bed at a care home. She was jailed for life by Teesside crown court and told that she will serve a minimum of nine years.

Two hours before the killing she had called Macmillan Cancer Support to ask if smothering her friend would make her a murderer. Davidson, 54, had claimed that the death of Mr Paterson, 81, was a mercy killing but pleaded guilty to murder after her call to Macmillan was discovered.

After the case, Mr Paterson's family said: "We all knew of, and respected, his deeply held Christian beliefs. We are, and Uncle David would have been, horrified that someone he classed as a friend and who he thought shared his Christian values would have acted in this way. She should have known he would have wanted it to be God's will when he died and allowed him to do so in privacy and with dignity. She had no right to do this to him. He did not have a lot of dignity at the end. Davidson took away the last remnants of this and thrust him and his life into the limelight. She had no right to do that."

Mr Paterson had been happily married for 51 years until his wife died in March last year. They had no children but he was in contact with his sister, nephews and nieces.

He got to know Davidson when he volunteered for a group helping people with mental health issues, which she attended because of alcohol problems. They went on to share a pew at St Mary's Church in Thirsk, North Yorkshire.

In her call to Macmillan, Davidson made complaints about how Mr Paterson was being treated at the Sowerby House care home in

Thirsk, which the prosecution said were unfounded.

She told the call handler: "It might be better if I could put a pillow over his face," and later asked: "Would I be a murderer if I did that?"

The charity worker replied firmly: "In the eyes of the law, yes you would, yeah." Davidson added: "If he was a dog he would have been put down months ago. I want him to be with his wife, I want him to be with all those lovely people that have died."

The Macmillan worker informed her supervisor during the conversation and the police were contacted but the call could not be traced immediately.

Jonathan Sharp, for the prosecution, said that Mr Paterson was "generally comfortable" and had been prescribed morphine. He added: "As a devout Christian, he had strong ethical objections to euthanasia. He had said, 'It will be God's decision and only God's' when it was his time to meet his maker."

Suspicious were raised after Davidson alerted staff to Mr Paterson's death and blood was noticed on the pillow. A post-mortem examination confirmed that he had been smothered.

Davidson, of Sowerby, North Yorkshire, pleaded guilty to murder last month, after police discovered evidence from the calls she had made to Macmillan. It was also revealed that she had been convicted in 2009 of trying to smother her neighbour's dog.

David Aubrey, QC, for Davidson, said the crime should be considered as a mercy killing as Davidson had seen her friend's deterioration over ten months. Had she known how close to death he was, she would not have acted, he said. Judge Simon Bourne-Arton told Davidson:

"You were saving him only a few hours of suffering.

"In so doing, you deprived him of what he wanted most, a natural death."

David Paterson wanted his death to be God's will

